

# Responding to COVID-19 in the Liverpool City Region

**The Liverpool City Region Doughnut: A Means  
for Securing a Green and Resilient Recovery?**

*Fiona Brannigan*

## Map of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) boundary (in red) and constituent local authorities



Data sources: Westminster parliamentary constituencies (December 2018 - ONS), local authority districts (December 2018 - ONS), and combined authorities (December 2018 - ONS)

# The Liverpool City Region Doughnut: A Means for Securing a Green and Resilient Recovery?

## Key takeaways

1. The COVID-19 crisis provides the impetus to fundamentally reconsider how we do things and to re-imagine the world we want to live in at a global, national and local level.
2. There are a number of emerging perspectives for recovery that the Liverpool City Region (LCR) could look to. These include the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), with many cities taking a holistic approach that prioritises social wellbeing and environmental sustainability.
3. One emerging recovery model, which sits within the UN SDGs, is doughnut economics. Amsterdam is the first city to publish its plans to utilise doughnut economics as a guide for its post COVID-19 recovery.
4. There are a series of practical steps that can be taken within the LCR to use the UN SDGs as a recovery framework and adopt the doughnut economics model. These steps can be supported by LCR anchor institutions, including the University of Liverpool, that are already embedding the SDGs.
5. The LCR is well placed to adopt the doughnut economics model, positioning itself as a world leader and setting on a pathway to becoming a city region that is a “home to thriving people in a thriving place while respecting the wellbeing of all people and the health of the planet”.

## 1. Introduction

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on our societies and economies and along with tackling the immediate crisis, the world is now beginning to consider how it can recover. The pandemic has highlighted stark inequalities in the UK, with those who are male, older, on low incomes, have underlying health conditions, and those from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities being disproportionately affected. It has also brought into sharp focus the lack of resilience for many in society that were already struggling to make ends meet.

At the same time we have seen some environmental benefits as a result of the changes we have made to our lifestyle – with a significant reduction in carbon emissions and air pollution, for example, and some positive impacts on biodiversity as we reduce the human pressure on ecosystems. We have also witnessed a

shift in values, with compassion, kindness and appreciation coming to the fore. However, all of these gains could be short-lived depending on the next steps we take and the degree to which we return to “business as usual”.

The challenge for the Liverpool City Region (LCR), and the rest of the world, is to find a recovery path that harnesses the positive impacts and at the same time addresses social inequalities – building in resilience so that we can weather future storms. This is a challenge that is perhaps particularly problematic for the LCR given the high levels of economic and health inequalities that existed within the region prior to the crisis (Higgins and Ashton 2020), further exacerbated by the vulnerabilities of its employment sectors, which are heavily reliant on the visitor economy, for example.

There are, however, a number of emerging perspectives for a green and resilient recovery that may provide a



**Figure 1.** The seventeen UN Sustainable Development Goals



framework for the LCR moving forward. This briefing elaborates on one approach that is positioned within the UN Sustainable Development Goals – providing a pathway as to how it might be successfully adopted by the LCR.

## **2. Emerging perspectives for a green and resilient LCR recovery**

The United Nations has called on governments and regions to utilise the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a framework for recovery. The UN SDGs are a set of 17 interrelated global goals that address the social, environmental and economic challenges in both developing and developed nations (see Figure 1).

The UK government, along with the 192 other UN member states, has made a commitment to achieving the UN SDGs. Within the LCR, anchor institutions are leading the way. The University of

Liverpool has pledged to [put the SDGs at the heart of all of its activities](#) and Liverpool City Council has made a commitment to embed them into [all of its policies and reflect the SDGs within the Select committee's work plan](#). Unilever is a powerful example of a large private sector organisation that has [fully embraced the goals](#), and the Royal Liverpool and Broadgreen University Hospitals NHS Trust is also now reporting on its [SDG progress](#). Liverpool's 2030Hub is building momentum around the goals within the LCR public and private sectors.

The COVID-19 outbreak is greatly impacting on the SDG work that is being undertaken, at both a global and local level. Along with the catastrophic impacts on Goal 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing), other goals that are negatively affected include Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities), Goal 2 (Zero Hunger) and Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). The UN has introduced funding to address these

concerns and to redouble efforts for achieving the goals.

The UK's Climate Change Commission, meanwhile, has set out six principles for a resilient recovery. The six principles seek to rebuild the nation by promoting a greener, cleaner and more resilient economy that encompasses fairness to all:

1. Use climate investments to support economic recovery and jobs.
2. Lead a shift towards positive, long-term behaviours.
3. Tackle the wider “resilience deficit” on climate change.
4. Embed fairness as a core principle.
5. Ensure the recovery does not lock-in greenhouse gas emissions or increased risk.
6. Strengthen incentives to reduce emissions when considering tax changes.

The Labour Party is also launching its proposals for a green recovery that focuses on a “re-assessment of what really matters in our society, and how we build something better for the future” (Walker and Taylor 2020).

All of these emerging perspectives include clear ambitions for adopting a holistic approach which prioritises social equity and environmental sustainability as well as developing the capacity to deal with future shocks. But how does this translate at a regional level? How could the LCR practically implement this?

One approach that is gaining some momentum is to model the recovery plan on doughnut economics.

### **3. Doughnut economics**

Doughnut economics is a model developed by Kate Raworth from Oxford University's Environmental Change Institute. It firmly embeds economics within the earth's natural and social systems and it highlights the extent to

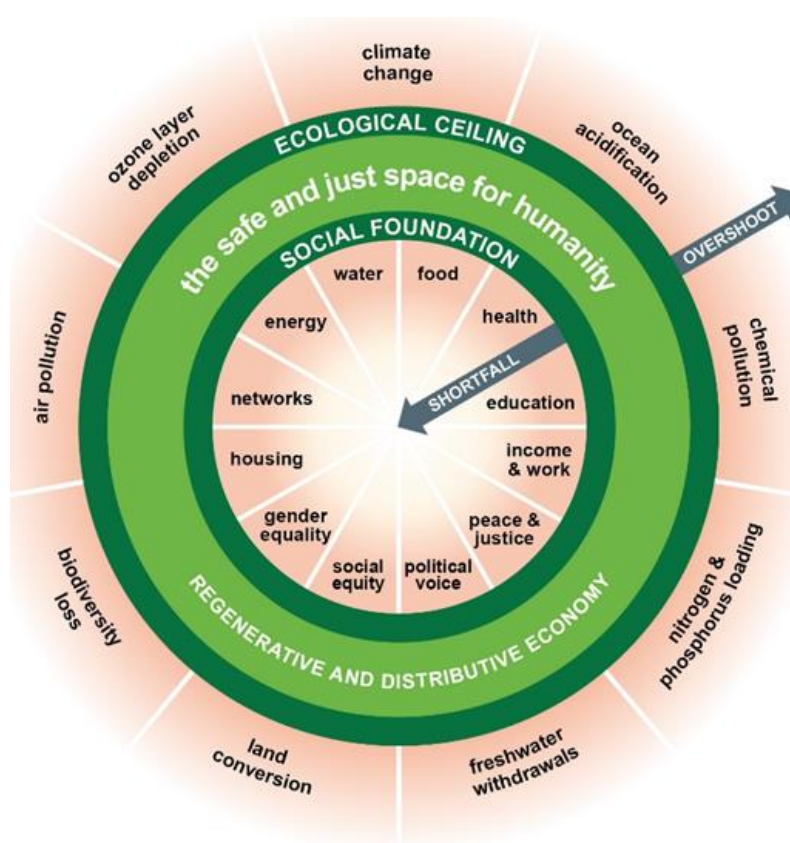
which the economy is fundamentally dependent upon the flow of energy and material from the natural world. In a COVID-19 world, perhaps we are now more conscious than ever about how interconnected nature and the economy truly are.

The “doughnut” itself is a holistic way of describing social and environmental boundaries (see Figure 2 overleaf). The outer line of the doughnut depicts environmental limits (the “ecological ceiling”) and includes greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss, air pollution and ozone depleting substances. If we go beyond this ceiling then we go into “overshoot” and we live in a world that is no longer ecologically safe. The inner line of the doughnut depicts the social foundation, and represents a decent standard of living. If we stay above the line we have enough food, water, housing, good health, education, cultural connectivity, peace, political voice, and employment. If we transgress this boundary then we go into “shortfall” and we are living in deprivation. The space in the middle, the “dough”, is the optimum place to be. In that space we are living within our ecological boundaries and everyone has sufficient resources to thrive.

Kate Raworth positions the doughnut within the UN SDGs (see Figure 3 overleaf) – the limits of the inner circle largely corresponding with the socially focussed SDGs, and the limits of the outer circle with the environmentally focussed SDGs. The doughnut model can be used as a way of understanding how far we have transgressed these boundaries and how well we are doing in meeting the SDGs, at a global, national and city regional level.

The doughnut economics model has now been translated into a series of toolkits that assist cities and regions to incorporate these principles within their

**Figure 2.** The doughnut economics model



*Credit: Kate Raworth*

strategies and policies. The toolkits have been developed as part of the Thriving Cities Initiative, as a collaboration between Circle Economy, C40, Biomimicry 3.8 and the Doughnut Economics Action Lab (DEAL).

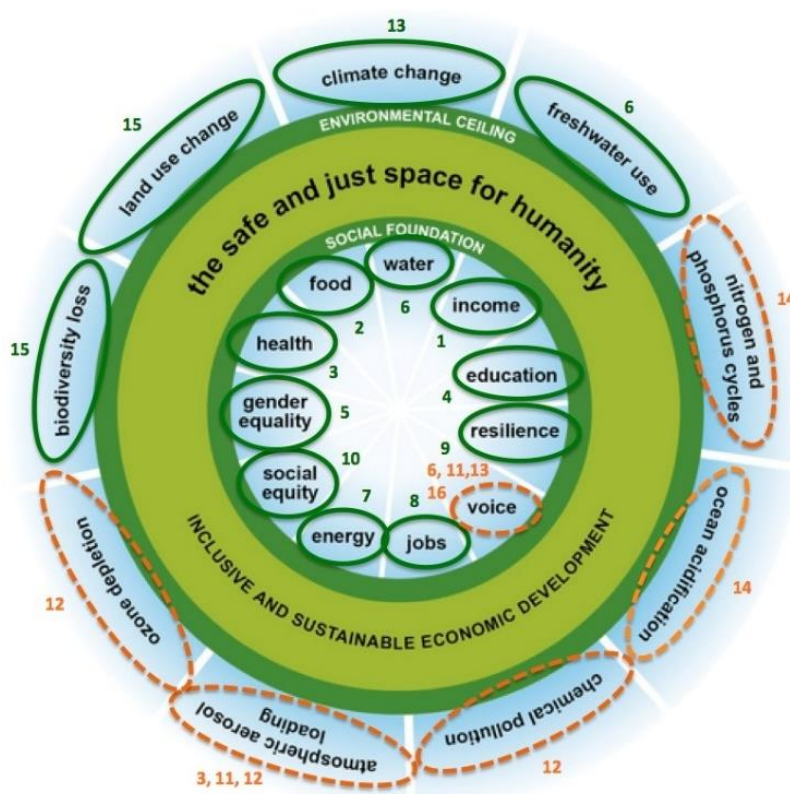
In April 2020, Amsterdam published its “city portrait” and became the first city in the world to announce that it would be using this as a guide to shape its post-COVID-19 recovery. The city portrait is “a holistic snapshot of the city...that serves as a starting point for big-picture thinking, co-creative innovation, and systemic transformation” (Doughnut Economics Action Lab et al. 2020).

Utilising the toolkit, Amsterdam is able to look at the social and environmental challenges it faces, not as individual, segregated issues but as a whole system, allowing the connectivity between seemingly separate elements to become clearer. With housing, for instance, there

is a growing problem with rent affordability; at the same time, carbon emissions from house building are increasing. From an economic perspective, rents are becoming more expensive not because of a lack of supply but because of increased global investment in real estate. Simply by using the doughnut economics model and considering these issues in the round, new ideas and solutions can develop. As Amsterdam’s Deputy Mayor notes, “The doughnut does not bring us the answers but a way of looking at it so that we don’t keep going on in the same structures we used to” (Walker and Taylor 2020).

In the US, Portland and Philadelphia are also piloting the toolkit, and although they have not yet published their city portraits, work is underway. Philadelphia, for example, is developing a “public and private sector strategy for reducing waste and consumption, while at the same time

**Figure 3.** Relationship between doughnut economics and UN SDGs



Credit: Kate Raworth

continuing to rebuild Philadelphia's economy" (Philadelphia Office of Innovation and Technology 2020).

#### 4. The LCR city portrait

If the LCR chooses to create a city portrait, then the central question that it would ask is: how can the LCR be a home to thriving people in a thriving place while respecting the wellbeing of all people and the health of the planet? Engaging with stakeholders, the LCR would explore this question from four interconnected perspectives:

- What would it mean for the people of the LCR to thrive?
- What would it mean for the LCR to thrive within its natural habitat?
- What would it mean for the LCR to respect the wellbeing of people worldwide?
- What would it mean for the LCR to respect the health of the whole planet?

#### The LCR social lenses

Working with the Thriving Cities Initiative, one part of developing the LCR city portrait would be to utilise key statistics to show the current position in terms of social equity from both a local and a global perspective.

At a local level, for example, we know that, within the LCR, one in four people of working age have a limiting health condition and that life expectancy is 2.5 years less than the national average (Higgins and Ashton 2020). At a global level, the LCR's impact on social equity might be considered in terms of procurement and the adoption of socially responsible standards.

The social elements are clustered into four categories:

- Health – health, housing, water and food



- Enablement – jobs, income, education, energy
- Connectivity – connectivity, community, mobility, culture
- Empowerment – peace, justice, social equity, political voice, equality and diversity

The key information gathered as part of this process would be placed within the social foundation (or “limits”) of the doughnut, and the LCR would begin to form a picture of the areas where it is doing well and where it is in shortfall.

At the same time, a snapshot of LCR targets arising from projects, aims and initiatives would be collated to illuminate the current actions that are being taken. A key initiative that is likely to be included, for example, is the Wealth and Wellbeing programme (Higgins and Ashton 2020). Similarly, the snapshot would include the work of the newly established LCR Economic Recovery Panel, the Merseyside Resilience Forum and the soon to be published LCR Local Industrial Strategy.

### *The LCR ecological lenses*

The second part to developing the LCR city portrait would be to begin to quantify and understand the pressure that the LCR places on the natural world at both a local and a global level, and the extent to which it is in ecological overshoot.

The Thriving Cities Initiative encourages cities to adopt a biomimicry approach, looking to the natural world to see how it solves problems and achieves balance, then utilising this as part of their forward planning. How does the natural world regulate temperature, for example, and how could the LCR adopt the same processes? To support this approach the local environmental elements of the city portrait are clustered into the following categories:

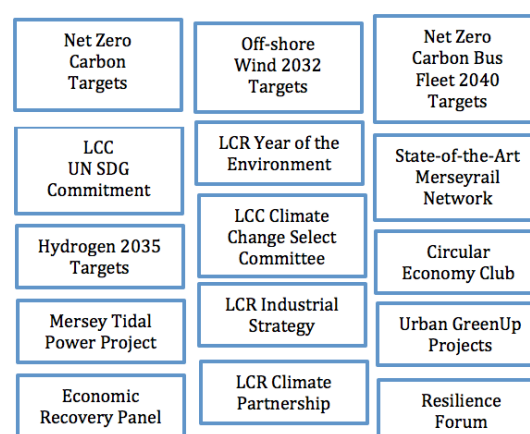
1. Air quality regulation
2. Temperature regulation
3. Energy harvesting
4. Biodiversity support
5. Erosion protection
6. Carbon sequestration
7. Water provisioning

At a global level, the LCR’s pressure on the planet would be quantified in terms of the nine ecological limits that make up the outer ring of the doughnut, including climate change, ocean acidification and air pollution.

The key information gathered as part of this process would be placed within the “ecological ceiling” (or limits of the doughnut) and the LCR would begin to form a picture of the areas where it is doing well and where it is in overshoot.

A snapshot of the current LCR environmental targets, strategies and activities would be taken, and is likely to include those referenced in Figure 4.

**Figure 4.** Environmental activities, strategies and targets pertinent to an LCR city portrait



### *From city portrait to compass*

Through this process the LCR city portrait would emerge and this would act as a “compass” for the future direction of policy and strategy development.

The doughnut itself would not only illustrate where the LCR’s overshoots and



shortfalls are, but it would also help us to understand them in a coherent and holistic way, integrating social wellbeing and environmental sustainability into a single visual model.

The social and environmental snapshots surrounding the doughnut provide context and a basis for further development.

Stories, insights, values, aspirations and innovative ideas can be included, gathered through engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, from community groups to academics and business leaders. The creators describe this as moving from a city portrait to a “city selfie”.

This engagement activity might utilise mechanisms piloted by other cities, including the UCL Global Prosperity Index – a set of prosperity indicators developed in consultation with communities that seeks to measure what communities truly value. The Global Prosperity Index supports investigations into “new ways of thinking about prosperity, value and inclusion, recognising that prosperity is about equitable futures, the health of society, inclusive models of development, civil liberties and active citizens as well as wealth creation and economic security” (UCL Institute for Global Prosperity 2018).

Stakeholder engagement can also incorporate work that has already been completed within the LCR, so as to better understand the City Region’s social and environmental challenges. The Heseltine Institute’s report *Towards a Green Future for Liverpool City Region* highlights the correlation between economic deprivation, air pollution and health inequalities, for example (Boyle et al 2019). This is a correlation brought even more sharply into focus as a result of COVID-19, with growing evidence that air pollution is a contributory factor to more severe health outcomes.

Each policy, idea or initiative that arises from this process would then be

benchmarked against the core question – how will this help the LCR to become a home to thriving people in a thriving place while respecting the wellbeing of all people and the health of the whole planet? – until a clear plan begins to emerge.

## 5. Changing mindsets

In essence, adopting a doughnut economics approach requires a shift in mindset.

- It shifts the focus from prioritising economic growth on the basis that this will lead to improvements in social wellbeing and environmental sustainability, to focussing on social wellbeing and environmental sustainability directly. The aim is to thrive; economic growth may or may not be a means of achieving that.
- It requires a systems thinking approach that builds in resilience at the start. From maintaining a vision of the big picture to bringing together parts of the system that don’t usually interact. For the LCR, this way of thinking and working is already beginning to be incorporated into strategy and policy development, including the work of the Wealth and Wellbeing Programme.
- It moves away from an economic model that rests on the idea that humans are fundamentally selfish and self-serving (Raworth 2018) – recognising instead that the human potential for compassion, kindness and co-operation, which has been so prominent during the coronavirus pandemic, can be cultivated. These are values that the people of the LCR are already noted for.

Whether the LCR adopts the doughnut economics model or not, these are all ways of thinking that are likely to prove crucial as we move through and beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

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